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SUBJECT: POLL OPENS DOOR INTO TURKEY'S SOUTHEAST

11. (SBU) Summary. A clear majority of residents polled in 14 southeastern Turkish provinces said they would prefer to live in Turkey even if an independent Kurdish state were founded in northern Iraq. The Turkish polling company Metropoll claimed its November survey of 1,079 people is the first of its kind in Turkey's predominantly Kurdish southeast. Metropoll director Ozer Sencar acknowledged the difficulty of obtaining reliable results on the southeast's most sensitive issues but stood by the survey's sometimes surprising findings. Metropoll, a generally reputable polling firm, conducted the survey by telephone to overcome residents' fear of retaliation by the terrorist PKK or the police and to increase the responses' credibility. "You have to make more calls in the southeast to get the same results because of people's fears," Sencar said, adding that rather than lying, participants tended not to answer sensitive questions. End summary.

Kurds and Zaza vice Turks and Arabs

12. (U) The poll, conducted in Siirt, Sirnak, Batman, Mardin, Diyarbakir, Sanlirufa, Adiyaman, Hakkari, Bitlis, Mus, Van, Tunceli, Bingol, and Agri provinces, indicates that 50% of participants spoke Kurdish as their mother tongue, 7% spoke Zaza (a Kurdish dialect), 30% spoke only Turkish and approximately 13% spoke Arabic. According to the poll, 95% of participants spoke some Turkish. Kurds and Zaza generally shared similar attitudes, as did Arabs and Turks.

Economic Development Trumps Human Rights, Democracy

13. (SBU) Unemployment, not human rights, ranked as the most important problem in the southeast for 42% of respondents. Terrorism was a distant second, at 15%, followed by economic underdevelopment (11%), education (7%) and social and cultural backwardness (4%). Only about 5% listed democracy (.5%), human rights (.6%), Turkish-Kurdish discrimination (2%) and Turkey's Kurdish problem (1.8%) as top concerns. The ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) focus on regional economic development is spot-on, Sencar noted: "Intellectuals see human rights and democracy as the biggest problems but the people say it's the economy." The poll also indicated that 10% of participants attribute Turkey's recent increase in terrorist violence to unemployment and poverty in the region, followed by a US plan to corner Turkey politically (9%), a desire to establish a Kurdish state (7%),

lack of education (7%) and efforts to create conflict between Turks and Kurds (4%). Unemployment and poverty were also the reason people join the PKK, according to 17% of respondents. Ignorance (11%), effective PKK propaganda (6%), insufficient government policies (4%) and Kurdish loyalty to the PKK (3%) were also cited. Only 1% cited lack of democracy.

Mixed Support for Northern Iraqi Kurds, CBO and PKK

14. (U) The poll results also refute the common misperception that all southeastern Kurds support northern Iraqi Kurds and the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), despite strong cultural and economic ties. Sixty-five percent of participants viewed the creation of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq negatively, and 95% of respondents said they would stay in Turkey rather than move to such a state. Seventeen percent viewed a northern Iraqi Kurdish state positively and 19% had no idea. "The concept of 'Kurdistan' is an intellectual utopia that average people don't actively support," Sencar commented.

15. (U) Among the Kurds and Zaza polled, roughly one-half sympathized with the PKK; predictably, virtually all the ethnic Arabs and Turks opposed the PKK. Over half of all respondents said pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) should declare the PKK a terrorist organization, while 30% said DTP should not (18% had no idea). Sixty-six percent of respondents believed Massoud Barzani and northern Iraqi Kurds support the PKK. Fifty-two percent wanted Turkey to launch a military cross-border operation (CBO) into northern Iraq to root out the PKK (35% opposed), though 40% admitted it would not solve the PKK problem (27% said it would). About 40% of Kurds and Zazas supported a CBO and 40% opposed (14% gave no answer); 60% of ethnic Arabs and Turks favored a CBO, with 26% opposing. Almost one-third said a CBO should target both

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the PKK and the northern Iraqi Kurdish administration, while 45% said only the PKK should be targeted. Nearly half said a CBO would never cause a Turkish-Kurdish clash (26% said it definitely would), and 41% expected a CBO would definitely or possibly cause a clash between Turkey and the USG. While 40% agreed Turkey should talk with Iraqi Kurdish leaders about the PKK, 45% opposed dialogue (16% had no idea). Almost half of respondents supported sanctions against the KRG to cut support for the PKK, with 34% opposing that approach.

Skepticism of the US

16. (U) The early November poll showed 73% of respondents believed the US does not support Turkey in its fight against the PKK, while 17% agreed that the US supports Turkey either partly or fully. Twenty-eight percent of those who believe the US does not support Turkey blame US interests for the policy, 11% said the US supports the PKK and uses it as a trump card, and 7% said the US does not want a strong Turkey.

AKP Out In Front

17. (SBU) Sencar speculated that many Kurds may oppose the PKK because it is a leftist, atheist organization while most Kurds are deeply pious conservatives. Almost 40% of participants indicated they are politically conservative, with 10.8% describing themselves as leftist and 21.5% stating they are neither. Over half of the leftists allied themselves with DTP and 42% said they support the People's Republican Party (CHP). Respondents split on whether DTP represents Turkey's Kurds, with 37% saying it does and 35% saying it does not. Ten percent said DTP does not represent Kurds sufficiently and 16% had no idea. A resounding 68% of participants said they would vote for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) if elections were held now; no other party received more than 4% support. AKP has continued to win over southeast voters by expanding successful programs to improve economic and political conditions in the region. Sencar pointed to PM Erdogan's and President Gul's visits to

the southeast, and the party's instructions to southeastern MPs to spend substantial time in the region, as smart strategies. Sixty percent of respondents said they believe AKP can solve Turkey's Kurdish problem (26% did not, and 14% had no idea).

18. (U) Also countering stereotypes, 65% of respondents reported they do not feel uneasy traveling outside the southeast, though 26% said they do and almost 20% expected some discrimination against Kurds following the recent spate of PKK attacks. Twenty-five percent predicted a CBO into northern Iraq would cause tension between Turkey's Turks and Kurds. Participants had no clear explanation for the recent increase in terrorism, with 37% of respondents declining to answer. Sencar ventured the PKK's goal is to hamper AKP efforts to develop the region by making Turks and Kurds clash again. Chaos in the region will revive support for the PKK and DTP, which have been losing ground to AKP. Given AKP's jump from 21% of the southeast vote in 2002 parliamentary election to 50% in the July 2007 vote, Sencar may be right. Respondents favored dialogue as the best way to solve Turkey's Kurdish problem (13%), followed by economic improvements (8%) and improving democracy and human rights (6%). Only 3% said violence was the solution. Almost 12% said Turkey has not Kurdish problem.

19. (SBU) Comment: Despite the poll's limitations (including an error margin of plus/minus 3), it provides a window into a poorly understood segment of Turkey's population. Metropoll admits to not directly asking highly sensitive questions, such as whether respondents support the PKK or its jailed leader Abdullah Ocalan. As a first step into probing stereotypes and prejudices surrounding Turkey's toughest domestic challenge, the survey succeeded in raising a few eyebrows. Follow-on polls may help dispel misconceptions about how southeast residents define themselves and where their loyalties lie -- information essential to finding political solutions to undermining the PKK and bringing stability to a troubled region. End comment.

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